Bridging the Skills Gap in Management Education: An Analysis of Employers' vs Students' Perspectives of Soft Skills in Rajasthan

Synopsis of the Research Proposal
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Proposed Summary

In the swiftly changing business environment, a lot of focus has been given to Soft Skills as essential factors of employability and professional advancement by the companies. At the same time, the technological advancement has influenced the manner companies work that has shown increasing discrepancy between Soft Skills that are accumulated through the students in the management schools and those that companies need. Business schools are sometimes judged for not providing close attention in imparting necessary Soft Skills that are important for professional success. Besides the curriculum imparted by the Business Schools it is also important to understand how much importance the students give to the Soft Skills and whether their perspectives are aligned with the corporate needs.

Hence, the study aims to investigate management students' and employers' perspectives of Soft Skills and assess their alignment. Further, this study wishes to identify strategies and give recommendations to bridge any existing gaps for improved employment outcomes.

The study will include a mixed-method approach including qualitative and quantitative methods. A structured questionnaire would be used as an instrument to gather insights of the perspectives of the students and the employers. Through the questionnaires, the respondents will be asked about the significance of Soft Skills relevant to job placements. Comprehensive set of recommendations would be given post the findings of the study.

Through this study, an effort is being made to add to insights of the impact of Soft Skills for purpose of employability with a hope that it might aid the Business Schools in making certain that students have requisite Soft Skills and meet evolving needs of the workforce.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Current scenario of a highly competitive environment and with the advancement of technology in every aspect of life, expectations of employers have augmented while recruiting a candidate for their companies. The employers have placed a lot of emphasis on Soft Skills as a crucial component of employability for the management students. This brings in the need for the potential aspirant to adapt to the skills according to the requirements of the employers in order for them to get placed in the corporate world. As there seems to be emerging gap concerning Soft Skills that management college students acquire and what businesses need, this study would like to explore the area further and identify strategies to bridge any such existing gaps.

Higher Education

According to Indian Employment Report 2024, the expertise needed to succeed in various fields is provided by the skills and knowledge gained via higher education, which greatly aids in economic development and progress. India's has a wide spread higher education system. Advanced education correlates with greater probability of consistent employment whereas lesser education correlates with temporary jobs. In 2022, the percentage of young people in formal jobs with master degree was higher (36.1 per cent) than among those with secondary (9.1%), elementary (2.3%) and less than primary (1.3 %) education. [1] There are about 1,168 universities in India according to the findings on higher education published by Statista Research Department, 2024. [2] Higher education Universities are categorized into Central Universities, State Universities, Private Universities and Deemed Universities. There are other prestigious institutes like IITs that are known for academic brilliance and autonomy. [3] India is also permitting foreign companies in order to internationalize the higher education. After pandemic, there has been a shift in the focus of digital learning. Rise of EdTech companies, various online platforms like Swayam and Coursera have made it possible to access resources globally.

Employability

According to World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report (2023), at a global level 69 million jobs will be generated and 83 million jobs will cease to exist. Hence, in next five years (2023-27) 23% or 14 million jobs will not exist. New roles like Data Analysts/ Scientists, etc. will require

up skilling as slowly Administrative jobs like Accounting, Bookkeeping will decline. [4] According to India Employment Report 2024, the employment conditions improved between 2005 and 2022, however during pandemic in 2019, this paused and took a reverse turn. [1] According to Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2024 the youth unemployment Rate (15-29 years) stood at 12.4% in 2021-22. In 2022-23, it stood at 10% and 2023-24 at 10.2% i.e. this year the unemployment rate has further increased by 0.2%. In Rajasthan, the unemployment rate of persons between 15-29 years stands at 12.4% as compared to 4.6% in Delhi. [5] If the youths have the appropriate skill set, the unemployment margins can be abridged further.

Management Colleges

According to the India Skills Report 2022, management students were found to be "the most employable talents, across all states after B.Tech graduates."[6]

Hence, in this study, we focus on management colleges, their students and the recruiters who hire from these management colleges. The placement of the students in a management college is an extremely important process, especially in today's competitive world. The employers not only look for domain or subject knowledge but also skills that can help a candidate catch up with the ever changing employability landscape. Hence, they have higher standards for recruiting a candidate. Therefore, it becomes important for the students to prepare themselves and work upon their skills so that it appeals to the recruiters. It is also vital for the management schools to prepare their students in order to make them employable.

In different studies, it has been revealed that postgraduate students are an important segment of education as they contribute to employment. Students with a management education are better equipped to make better decisions and drive the success of the organization.

Therefore, the obligation lies in the hands of management colleges and the students to hone their skills to be fit into the workforce. The skills include Technical as well as Soft Skills i.e., all the competencies that are necessary for today's job market. The students need to be trained and tutored to excel in every part of the job. However, this study focuses especially on Soft Skills.

Soft Skills:

According to various studies, Soft Skills are correlated to employability of business graduates. It supports individuals to mold into a working environment and deal positively with their tasks. Leading companies are adopting cutting edge hiring practices that emphasize on specific Soft Skills as it allows to function well in jobs. These skills helps to enhance personality and in this competitive world, help the students stand out among ordinary talent. It focuses on improving group discussions and their interview skills. National Education Policy, 2020 has also underlined the growing importance of Soft Skills. It has emphasized on skills like problem-solving, teamwork and communication. [7] Soft Skills can help to face the day today challenges of life and enhance the chances of the student to be employable. If students practice their communication skills, they generally perform better during group discussions and interviews.

At workplace, it improves the work culture as employees know how to communicate assertively. Soft skills are important even though in varying degrees to sail through work pressures of daily lives.

Skill Gaps:

It is evident that employability demands developing both soft and technical abilities. In other words, 21st century skills are required. Hence, up skilling and reskilling is required. Many graduates in India struggle to find employment that aligns with their education, even with the country's young workforce and growing economy. In a research conducted by Coursera for Future of Jobs Report, 2023 individuals on the platform prioritized developing technical or “hard” skills. [4] However, it is found that companies are putting value on Soft Skills as well that will enable the business to adapt to any kind of change.

Also, various studies have hinted in discrepancy in the observed Soft Skills and the expected skills by the employers which has often led to the skill gap while assessing the performance of the students.

1.2 Conceptual Definitions:

1. Skill – It alludes to the proficiency, capability and understanding to complete a work task.

2. Soft Skills - They are interpersonal and social abilities for both personal and professional contexts.

3. Skills gap – Skill gap is an incompatibility between the individual's skills and those required by the company.

4. Employability - It is about accomplishments that includes knowledge, character traits and abilities which increases the chances of getting a job and thrive in them that helps not only themselves but also the immediate environment and the nation**.**

5. Unemployment – It is the percentage of jobless people in the labour force.

6. Competency- It is the core trait that differentiates a person from effective to being superior in his or her job.

7. Perspective – It is the capacity to view things in their true relations; point of view; prospect or a mental view.

8. Employer – An individual or an organization that offers work to one or various persons.

1.3 Theories/ Models

The theories and the models that appear to be relevant for the exploratory study are mentioned in the following paragraphs. The study proposes to use the inputs from the following:

- To get the basic insight of the terminologies, ModEs guidelines will be used in this study. It consists of explanation of a few terminologies of Soft Skills that has been already tested. [8] It offers Validity which means that the referred skill is aligned to the job profile concerned. [9]
- A Generic Competency Model of Managers (Lyle M. Spencer and Signe M. Spencer) will also form base of the study partially. It offers precise, detached, simple technique of envisaging effectiveness on job.[10]
- Daniel Goleman's Emotional Competence Framework (1998). It had twenty-five competencies arranged in five clusters.[11]
- Competencies suggested by Nataliia Volkova et al. in their research paper "Soft skills, their development and mastering among post graduate students". [12]

- The Lancaster Model by Burgoyne and Stuart (1976) suggested by S. Sanghi. [13]
- Sectoral priorities for “Soft Skills”, Future of Jobs Report. [4]

Overlapping variables in above-mentioned models and theories will be studied and collated in a way to derive to a meaningful construct. Thereafter, the researcher will device a consolidated model that will align with this study.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Lara Varpio et al. (2020) defines it as “A judiciously established collection of ideas and presumptions from various theories in order to support his research.” [14] The research framework will integrate the various theories, especially the ones mentioned above to capture the essence of all the competencies mentioned in different theories and models. It will allow the researcher to do an all-inclusive study of the various variables and competencies.

1.5 The problem under investigation

Employers do not approve of the quality of the students who graduate from the management colleges. According to the employers, the students lack Soft Skills like collaborative skills, critical thinking, decision-making and communication. At times, they do not show the enthusiasm of being a part of the company during the hiring process. If the attitude is not positive, they may not get hired. Lack of preparedness and lack of confidence may again hinder the chances of them getting hired. There are visible skill gaps with respect to leadership skills, creativity, innovation and problem solving skills.

Even when the students have the best technical skills, they might not get hired or promoted later if they don't demonstrate the right Soft Skills. Hence, this study in particular makes an effort to understand the perspective of the students about Soft Skills and further makes an attempt to align it with the perspective of the employers’ requirements in order to identify strategies to make the students employable.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review offers an all-inclusive examination of the current research. It provides foundation for the study by analyzing association between Independent and Dependent Variables.

Employability grounded on graduates' higher education

According to Ly Thi Tran et. al. (2022) "Universities and nations globally are placing emphasis on advancing graduate employability as it is considered as an authoritative tool for the progress of individuals." [15] Adela Garc´ıa-Aracil et al. (2022) states that "results strongly support the idea that it matters how well individual's competencies fits the traits of businesses and organizations." [16] Anderson V and Tomlinson M (2021) states, "prospective employers directly benefit from the competencies as their hiring and applicant selection decisions impact the possibility that graduates will find job placement. Employers value greatly graduates with high levels of competencies as they become more successful in job market; graduates with lower levels of competencies are not valued highly as they contribute to the unemployability" [17]. According to India Skill Report, on business education, "the MBA domain emerges with a commanding 71.16% employability score, indicating a prevailing preference for a business-oriented skill set. This underscores a positive outlook for leadership and managerial roles in the job market, showcasing the importance placed on strategic and managerial expertise. In the ever evolving landscape of corporate hiring in India, the latest insights produce a dynamic shift in the demand for talent across industries. The upcoming year is poised to witness a significant surge in the overall demand for postgraduates, constituting a notable 25% of the corporate workforce [18]. Ramakrishnan Raman, Dhanya Pramod (2022) states, "the main focus of post graduate management colleges is to focus on the curriculum offered as it is the base that prepare students for the placements. The students enrolled for the management course gain theoretical and practical skills needed by businesses, which can make them on success track the moment they start with professional journey." [19] Sukhada Tambe (2021) states, "In addition to the technical know-how, Soft Skills plays crucial role in improving students' employability and their professional success." [20]. Brenda Ping Ping Yong et. al. (2023) referring to Soft Skills states, "Higher education institutions (HEIs) globally view graduate employability as a prime objective in order to reduce the skills gap between their universities and the industry." [21] As mentioned earlier, the employers are the direct beneficiaries,

inclusion of employer dimension is necessary. Hence, in this context, employability is explained through the Soft Skills development.

Importance of Soft Skills for management students

Unnati Shiwakoti et al. (2024) states "Soft Skills are progressively being known as an integral ingredient to succeed in job market which is extremely competitive today especially in business management sector." [22] Nicholas Chandler (2024) in his study finds Soft talents or Soft Skills are valued more as compared to technical skills by employers. While businesses favor Soft talent or Soft Skills, the universities continue to place more emphasis on technical skills. Intuition, innovation and foreign language communication were new critical work competencies were discovered. [23] According to Timothy et al. (2021) "Soft skills are general abilities that are important for the graduates' placements. They are the foundation through which the employers test the potential employees' ability to add value. In current scenario, graduate degree or diploma based on technical competencies are not the only prerequisite for employment. Seeing the evolving market and demand by employers for graduates with necessary and specific skills of job profiles, employers are apprehensive about the graduates' employability in terms of problem-solving, emotional intelligence, work ethics and leadership skills among others."[24] Kasumu et al. (2023) stated, "Students should work on Soft skills as they are important for their studies and employment in future and also they are straight linked to improved academic achievement. They should be able to have the qualities of balanced person that is expected of someone with their education. They should be able to perform their professional duties well for which they get prepared. Hence, students should hone their Soft Skills as its benefits are apparent. When they get a job they will be expected to maintain professional decorum by behaving properly with colleagues, they should articulate their thoughts and feelings better, be adaptable and a good team player, to be ethical, friendly and assertive. Some common Soft Skills are communication, teamwork, creativity, etc. and is applicable in all studies and place of employment and across all levels. [25] Further, Nataliia Volkova et al. (2020) categorizes Soft Skills into clusters: social and communication skills, cognitive skills, personal qualities and emotional intelligence.[12] According to Prachi Tiwari et al. (2022) " Numerous polls show emotional intelligence, leadership and teamwork contribute to increased business firm performance and profitability.''[26] Finally, according to Anjali Vyas (2019) "For management students Soft Skills are crucial. Management professionals with

"winner" mentality are needed by employers. Organizations like IBM, Google, Infosys, Reliance, etc. view skills like leadership, communication and interpersonal skills essential for managerial success."[27]

Students' perspective

Perception of students have been mostly in terms of ranking of the skills needed for them for their respective careers. Kelvin M. Mwita et al. (2023) in his study of higher education students asked them to rank Soft Skills based on how applicable they were to their careers. "The top five most relevant Soft Skills identified were communication, leadership, decision-making, team orientation and problem-solving. In addition, participants self-evaluated their levels of Soft Skills. Findings show students were thought to have more customer orientation, communication, decision-making, problem-solving, and work-ethic skills." [28] In a study done by Valeria Caggiano et al. (2020), participants of higher education saw themselves as cooperative people, group-focused, individuals who constantly strive to prioritize the opinions of the group over their own. They have trust in the teamwork and believe working as a team better than working alone. [29]According to Cornelia ARYANTI et al (2020) in a study of Accounting graduates, "The students believe honesty is the most necessary quality for graduates, while they think loyalty to the institution, written communication skills, and report writing are least important quality." [30] In a study by Norshima Binti Zainal Shah et al. (2022) when asked about Problem Solving and Thinking Skills, the student responded by saying "when there is sudden plan change, then quick decision-making is required and therefore he focuses on listening properly to lecturer's explanation and then makes decision based on problem analysis." [31] In a study by Fazal Mohammad Mohammadi (2020), "50% post graduate students had medium level of viewpoint regarding value of Soft Skills in teaching and learning, whereas 27.50% and 21.67% had high and low opinions, respectively."[32]. Deepika Thakur (2020) found in her study of different universities of Rajasthan especially the views of students in Jaipur University on developing managerial skill set that the participants approved that management education fosters Problem Solving skills, Leadership skills and greater appetite for Risk Taking. However, they pointed out that the education does not deliver tangible outcomes in terms of Decision Making; that shows a disparity. The participants vehemently disagreed that there is no opportunity to showcase Creativity & Innovativeness. The participants were indecisive for Time Management skills, somehow." [33]

Employers' perspective

Ahmed Al-Asfour (2024) in his study states, possessing the right soft skills simplifies hiring. Businesses hire candidates who has dedication and zeal eventhough they would be lacking in industry-specific skills. Businesses feel at ease like that. In one of his interviews that he conducted for the study, he found that a good hire who shows up on time always, work hard and be motivated, can be trained further for a role. Lack of Soft Skills, on the other hand will not only pose as an obstacle during the hiring process but also once he or she starts working on the job." [34] According to Noah and Aziz (2020), for an individual to get hired, he or she should have the both knowledge and skill that allows to do a job well. For this purpose, we have higher institutions that can provide knowledge and the skill both. However, the author finds that graduates lack Soft Skills. [35] Norshima B.Z.S. et. al. (2022) finds that even though the instructors stated that Soft Skills are taught at the university, employers believed that graduates or new hires lacked requisite Soft Skills. [31] Dr. Rashmi Kaushik et al. (2024) finds in her study "Instilling Soft Skills is important at present to boost career, increase job performance and converting hardships into prospects. In this fiercely competitive environment, working on Soft Skills will help an employee stand out, improve his relationships, productivity, and career profession."[36] Mrs. Anjali Vyas (2019) finds that "'Soft-Skills' vital for businesses are Delegation, Team work, Adaptability, Life and Entrepreneurial talents." [27]

Skill gap

Neha Bhatnagar (2020) mentions "when MBA graduates lack knowledge and abilities necessary to be sought by employers, there is a skill gap. Hence, there may be unemployment, needless interruptions in beginning the careers and a tendency to accept bargained work responsibilities and that too with low pay packages."[37] Getahun, M. and Mersha, D (2020) says "getting equipped with right knowledge, skills and field experience is crucial for increasing employability and upholding a competitive advantage." [38] Ahmed et al. finds "when there is a large gap between present skill set and those expected, it results in little employee drive and performance. It further leads to employer discontent, which will ultimately result in low output." [39]. Stewart, C. et al. (2020) states "every employer look for job candidates who are confident of their achievements as well as their skill levels. Hard skills are easy to identify or verify, however Soft Skills are more challenging to define or measure. There is disparity in Soft Skill between what recent graduates

possess and bring to their occupation and what is actually required for triumph on the job. Employers emphasize that college graduates lack Soft Skills that is needed to get a job or perform effectively on the job."[40] Juhasz Timea et al. (2023) in his finding stated that "both the employer and the employee were cognizant of Soft Skills required for jobs, they were not in agreement of their needs. Even though skill enhancement increases companies' and employees' market competitiveness, it does not really align with what the market expect." [41] Timothy et al. (2021) in his study found "Soft Skill pertaining to responsibility, administrative and communication skills were highly valued by employers. However, the findings demonstrated considerable gaps with skills such as logical thinking, business negotiation, responsibility and marketing." [24] When study was conducted by Brenda Ping Ping Yong et al. (2023) in terms of ranking Soft Skills by students and businesses using Mean score comparisons, "balancing life was ranked most important skill to have (M=5.53), followed by communication skills (M= 5.48) while self-care is ranked third (M=5.46) by students. Contrary to that for businesses proactivity is the most skill (M=5.70), followed by job commitment (M=5.67) while third is organizational skills (M=5.63)." [21]

When employers everywhere are primarily wanting to hire most accomplished individuals and if disparity between curriculum and the skills remains, then the focus has to be on current educational standards. According to Fernando Almeida and José Morais (2023), "higher education institutes is aware of how important is Soft Skill for their students, however, there are not many disciplines that focus exclusively on this subject. Irrespective of any higher education institutes, value of fostering Soft Skills in academia is acknowledged, mainly as a means of preparing their students for the demands of new age jobs." [42] K.B. Sridevi (2019) states, "paradigm change is required in current management education to meet evolving needs of businesses. Students cannot meet the increasing needs of the industry for Soft Skills by mere management education alone. Arguments are also extended to reality that employers and higher education institutes do not communicate well with one another. Hence, in cases like these, disparity in skills keeps growing undetected." [43]

Research Gap-

- After Review of Literature, it is evident that bridge between Soft Skills and employability requires more close investigation. A very important problem lies in the fact that what are the various stakeholders' perspective on it. Understanding how the management students see

significance of Soft Skills with respect to jobs besides how can it be aligned to the employers' perspective will show a way forward in terms of preparing the students for their job placements.

- This study is an attempt to investigate the problem further so that it acts as a useful information in the hope of impacting all the stakeholders involved in future.
- Also, Literature Review was also done in order to understand the contexts, competencies, methodology and findings of the various studies.

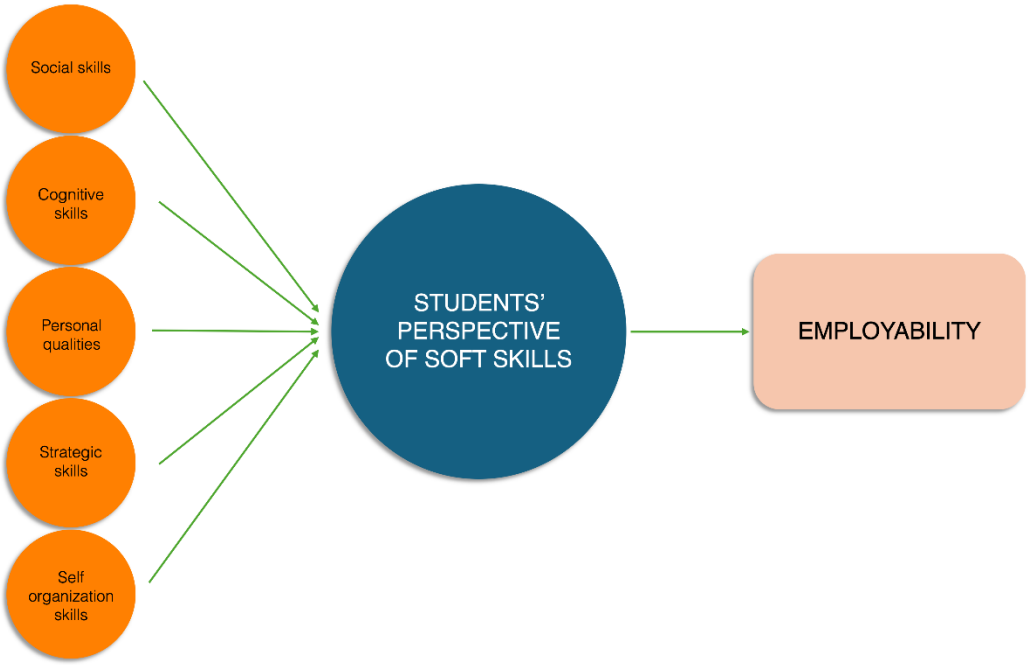
Brenda Ping Ping Yong et al (2023) mentions, "There have been emergence of various online educational platforms in the 21st century and Soft Skills can be imparted and be learnt forever as long as there is a will." [21]

Based on above study, following variables have been identified.

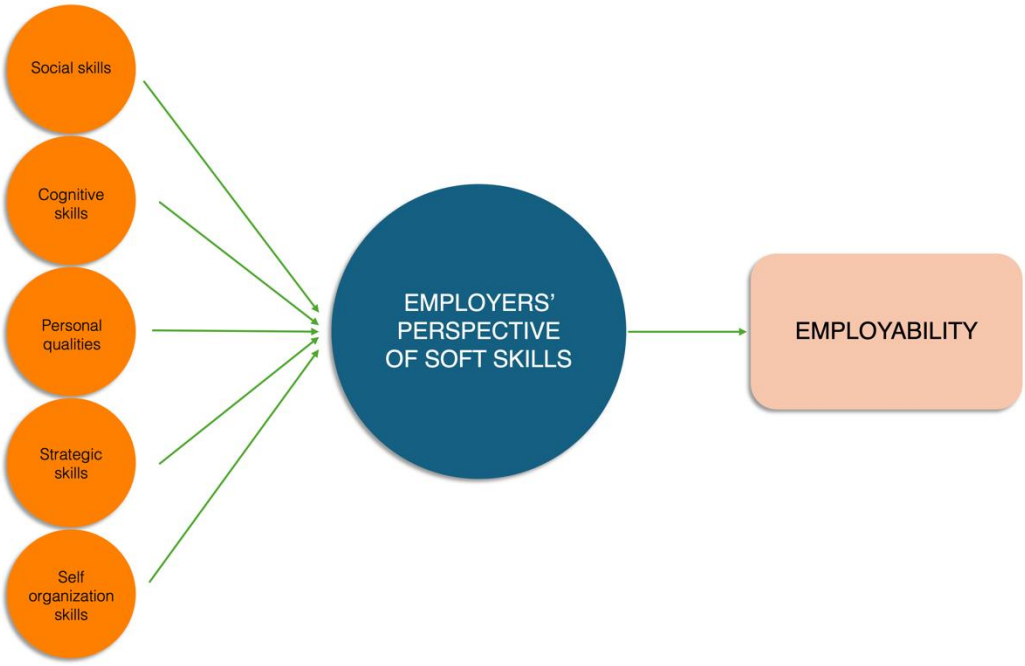
Independent Variables: Employers' perspective of Soft Skills, Students' perspective of Soft Skill

Dependent Variables: Employability

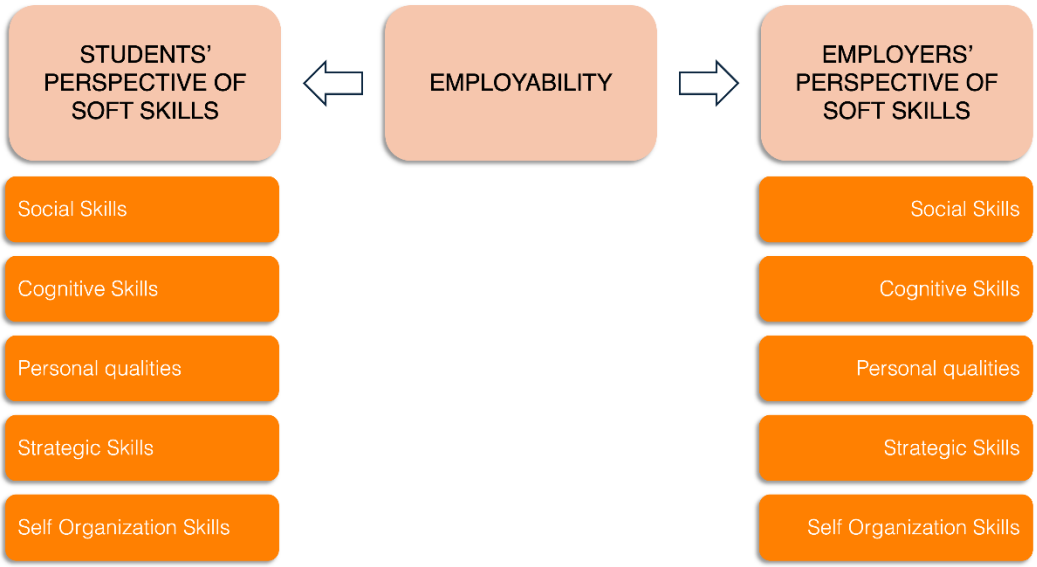
Based on the above relationship, the proposed model is suggested. This framework is a broad consolidation of multiple theories.



i) Students' perspective of Soft Skill and Employability



ii) Employers' perspective of Soft Skill and Employability



iii) Students' and Employers' perspective of Soft Skill and Employability

In the above images, the groups can be further divided based on the following competencies:

Social skills – Communication skills, interpersonal understanding, teamwork, leadership, assertiveness, responsibility.

Cognitive skills – Analytical thinking, problem solving, conceptual thinking, information seeking.

Personal qualities – Honesty, positivity, flexibility, creativity, empathy.

Skills of self-organization – Achievement orientation, self-esteem, ability to reflect, balanced learning habits, relevant professional knowledge.

Strategic Skills – Planning, decision making, delegation, risk taking.

3. PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Statement of the Problem

In a study by Rajashree K. Gethe et al (2020) it is stated, "A Graduate hopes to find a job that pays well after he or she gets a Management degree. However, few graduates do not the appropriate jobs and few others are underemployed. They may have spent a lot on their education but they may not have the apt skills that the employers expect. The employers wants to hire those candidate who have competence in their respective area besides the Degree." [44]. A few other studies have also shown that students' point of view about Soft Skills vary from what employers demand. Jean-Baptiste RG Souppez (2023) finds that the employers value attitude and the way students behave; however, students and to less extent academics devalue it. [45]. Even though, it is vital for students to acquire the skills, it may not be easy for them every time due to variety of reasons like financial constraints, lack of appropriate training, disinterest and even the importance that is given by the

students to Soft Skills. In order to get placed, it is important to overcome these challenges. Hence, the statement of the problem is "**to understand how much importance is given by the students on Soft Skills and does it align with the expectation of the employers in order to make them employable. The students may have the best technical skills but if they do not display apt Soft Skills, they may not get hired or promoted later."**

3.2 Significance/ Rationale of the Study

Research has indicated that there has been lots of efforts put in by organizations when it comes to campus placements. However, finding the right fitment for the job becomes a difficult task. Various concerns have been raised by the employers about the management college students' preparedness for the positions they have applied for. The employers feel that many students lack the skill sets that they expect them to have. According to A. Fairuzza Binti Hairi (2011) The most probable reason that students do not get jobs is that they fall short of Soft Skills. [46] Hence, it is imperative to dig deep into the cause that is creating this gap. Are the management colleges or universities not able to cater to the needs of the organizations or the students do not give importance to Soft Skills? And even if the management colleges puts in the effort and prepare the students for the workforce; the colleges may not be able to achieve the goal of closing the skill gap if the students underrate the importance of Soft Skill.

- Sabreya Khanom Zuma (2023) suggests that Soft skills have very strong correlation to employability of business graduates." [47] Hence, the aim is to study the overall impact of aligning management students' perspectives on Soft Skills with employers' perspectives on Soft Skills, identifying strategies and give suitable recommendations to bridge any existing gaps for improved employment outcomes. This will in turn help academia to develop customized programs to meet the demands of the employers.

Contextualizing Rajasthan

Anjali Vyas (2019) mentions about Rajasthan that it is known for having a comprehensive institutional and educational system. The idea is to establish a structure that strives for perfection in quality, is available to all society groups, and produces skilled resources that are resilient to

changing circumstances. Multidisciplinary colleges offering a broad range of courses in numerous topics can be found throughout the state. The need for management education has grown during the last two to three decades. Management education is one of the most crucial prerequisites for aspiring managers and leaders. The changing business and industrial scene is forcing business institutes to recognize and modify the educational system. A number of establishments are incapable of offering top-notch management education. At the moment, the institutions' resource supply and industry's demand are not aligned. The main reason is that education is given precedence over practical experience for students. Experts have differing views on how management education should be structured and taught. [48]

Also, the India Employment Report, 2024 suggests that even though Rajasthan has improved its employment Index ranking, it still ranks at the 9th position and states like Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Telangana, and Uttarakhand tops in the rank of employment index.[1] Hence, to conduct the study in Rajasthan is an apparent choice. In India Skills Report 2022, it does not feature in the top ten states in the employability index of India and hence according to these reports, the status is an area of concern. [6] Therefore, it is practical to understand the nuances so that students become more employable in this state.

Previously, mostly studies have focused on employers' perspective and a few investigations have been done on perception of graduate students. There are a few studies that have investigated both the sides together. Hence, this work adds to current literature by taking a comprehensive viewpoint of both sides of the story and comparing both the groups in the same study.

3.3 Objectives of the study:

1. To assess management students' perspectives of essential Soft Skills and its relevance to employability.

2. To assess employers' perspectives of Soft Skills and its relevance to employability.

3. To analyze the relationship between employers' perspectives of Soft Skills and management students' perspectives of Soft Skills, identifying the alignment or gap between perspective of students' skills and employers' demands.

4. To identify strategies and give suitable recommendations to bridge any existing gaps for improved employment outcomes.

3.4 Hypothesis

Based on Theoretical framework and the Literature Review, the following Hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1:

$H_0$1: There is no significant relationship between students' perspective of Soft Skills and employability.

$H_1$1: There is significant relationship between students' perspective of Soft Skills and employability.

Sub Hypothesis:

$H_{01:}$ There is no significant relationship between management students' perspective of Social skills and employability.

$H_{11:}$ There is significant relationship between management students' perspective of Social skills and employability.

$H_{02:}$ There is no significant relationship between management students' perspective of Cognitive skills and employability.

$H_{12:}$ There is significant relationship between management students' perspective of Cognitive skills and employability.

$H_{03:}$ There is no significant relationship between management students' perspective of personal qualities and employability.

$H_{13:}$ There is significant relationship between management students' perspective of personal qualities and employability.

$H_{04:}$ There is no significant relationship between management students' perspective of self-organization skills and employability.

$H_{14:}$ There is significant relationship between management students' perspective of self-organization skills and employability.

$H_{05:}$ There is no significant relationship between management students' perspective of strategic skills and employability.

$H_{15:}$ There is significant relationship between management students' perspective of strategic skills and employability.

Hypothesis 2:

$H_0$2: There is no significant relationship between employers' perspective of Soft Skills and employability.

$H_1$2: There is significant relationship between employers' perspective of Soft Skills and employability.

Sub Hypothesis:

Sub Hypothesis:

$H_{01:}$ There is no significant relationship between employers' perspective of Social skills and employability.

$H_{11:}$ There is significant relationship between employers' perspective of Social skills and employability.

$H_{02:}$ There is no significant relationship between employer' perspective of Cognitive skills and employability.

$H_{12:}$ There is significant relationship between employers' perspective of Cognitive skills and employability.

$H_{03:}$ There is no significant relationship between employers' perspective of personal qualities and employability.

$H_{13:}$ There is significant relationship between employers' perspective of personal qualities and employability.

H_{04}: There is no significant relationship between employers' perspective of self-organization skills and employability.

H_{14}: There is significant relationship between employers' perspective of self-organization skills and employability.

H_{05}: There is no significant relationship between employers' perspective of strategic skills and employability.

H_{15}: There is significant relationship between employers' perspective of strategic skills and employability.

Hypothesis 3:

$H_0$3: Students' perspective of agreement that Soft Skill is related to employability is same employers' perspective of agreement that Soft Skills is related to employability.

$H_1$3: Students' perspective of agreement that Soft Skill is related to employability is not same employers' perspective of agreement that Soft Skills is related to employability.

Primarily the above-mentioned competencies based on Theoretical Framework and Literature Review would be used. However, during course of study there will be overlapping competencies which may have to be removed or may have to be added. The final set of competencies will be consolidated and accordingly there may be a need to amend the Sub Hypotheses.

3.4 Research Questions

1. What is the perspective of management students of essential Soft Skills and its relevance to employability?

2. What is the perspective of employers' Soft Skills and its relevance to employability?

3. What are the areas of alignment or gap between employers' and students' perspective of Soft Skills for employability?

4. What are the strategies to bridge any existing gaps between employers' and students' perspective of Soft Skills for improved employment outcomes?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

According to Sumbl Ahmad Khanday and Deeba Khanam (2023), it is when a researcher adopts a step wise approach to get legitimate answers to queries and also it dictates the kind of analysis that needs to be performed in order to obtain intended outcomes." [49] It includes a step-by-step guide for the investigator, from formulating hypotheses and weighing their operational implications to finally doing data analysis.

Exploratory research methods are planned to be used in the current study. According to C.R. Kothari (2004), "The goal is to frame a problem for an accurate examination based on ideas and develop hypotheses from functional standpoint."[50]

Descriptive research methods are planned to be used in the current study. According to C.R. Kothari (2004), "It focuses on explaining traits a person or a collection of persons and provides comprehensive facts."[50] In addition to gathering facts, it could lead to the increase of vital knowledge concepts and the resolution of essential issues as it examines phenomena in their natural environment. It is extensively used in educational research and will yield data that will serve as the basis for any upcoming studies.

Strategy: Mixed-method approach (quantitative and qualitative strategies) would be applied. This approach will allow for a comprehensive analysis that will incorporate the statistical strength of quantitative methods and in-depths insights from qualitative data.

Specific Methodological Details:

Define criteria for determining final competencies - To identify and validate the final competencies influencing employability, the following systematic approach will be undertaken:

Step 1: Literature Review

To identify competencies frequently cited in employability research, Literature Review would be done.

Step 2: Survey-Based Validation

A structured survey (Likert scale) will be administered to the target population.

Step 3: Pilot Testing

The finalized competencies will be pilot-tested on a smaller representative sample to assess clarity and relevance. Competencies with acceptable level of clarity and relevance ratings will be retained, while ambiguous or less relevant competencies will be rephrased or excluded.

This multi-stage validation process will ensure that the selected competencies are comprehensive, relevant, and aligned with the study's objectives.

4.2 Sample/Participants

Sohil Altaf Pirani (2024) defines Sample as "subset of population which is representative of subjects or objects under study."[51] The subset can be utilized to form an opinion of the bigger group.

Proposed sample consists of two sets of questionnaires with the same set of variables seeking perspectives of both cohorts:

(i) Study of the students' perspectives:

The first is the study all students enrolled in full-time Post Graduate Program of Management College, Rajasthan. The sample would be drawn from the total population of all students across the management colleges.

The sample will be based on homogenous groups in Simple Random sampling method which is a type of probability sampling will be followed to draw the sample from the target population. It is cost effective, speedy, accurate and workable method. The probability sampling would ensure that sample is representative of the population. The frame will be a list or database of all members of a population**.**

Inclusion criteria of the Sample:

The criteria for inclusion are that the participants or the students must be a post graduate full –time management student pursuing their MBA/PGDM in a college in Rajasthan.

Exclusion criteria of the Sample:

The post graduate management students from Distance Learning, Executive Management Programs and any other online classes will not form the part of the study.

Sample size

The researcher will prepare a list of colleges and universities to be approached and rely on their student lists to select the sample. A sample size of respondents from these colleges will be used for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

(ii) Study of the employers' perspectives:

The second is the study of the employers who come to the campuses to recruit students from management colleges will constitute the population of the study. The sample would be drawn from the total population of all employees across these companies.

Non-probability Purposive Sampling will be followed to draw the sample from the target population. The frame will be a list or database of all members of a population**.**

Inclusion criteria of the Sample:

The criteria for inclusion are that the participants of these companies must play a significant role in recruitment process of the company that involves campus placement. They should be the core process owners of the recruitment process.

Exclusion criteria of the Sample:

The sample will exclude the employees of the company who are does not play any significant role in the campus placements.

Sample size

The researcher will produce a list of companies that approach the management colleges and the sample would be chosen based on the list. A sample size from these companies will be used.

4.4 Data Collection Method:

A structured questionnaire is being planned and will be distributed to management students and to the employers who come to recruit from these colleges for primary data collection. There will be two parts of data collection i.e. from the management students and the employers.

(i) Primary Data collection for the management colleges:

- **Universe of the study**: There are a total of four private management colleges in Rajasthan, three colleges of national importance that offers full time courses. Also, there are 45 universities that offer management courses. [52] The study plans to include all post graduate students from these colleges and universities. The colleges that offer only Distance Learning, Executive Management Programs and any other online classes will not form the part of the study.
- **Sampling design:** Simple Random sampling method which is a type of probability sampling will be followed to draw the sample from the target population.
- **Tools:** Structured questionnaire will be designed to gather data on students' perspectives on Soft Skills with respect to employability is being planned.
- **Techniques**: A Likert scale questionnaire might be used to gather response from the respondents with limited number of open ended questions for qualitative insights.
- **Statistical consideration/ software applications** – Correlation Analysis, Multiple Linear Regression Analysis, etc. will be applied post data collection. Further, statistical tools will be identified during the course of the study that would be relevant with the alignment of the study.

(ii) Primary Data collection for the employer:

- **Universe of the study**: The study plans to include all employees from these organization who play significant role in the campus process. The organizations that do not do campus selection from these colleges will not be a part of the universe.
- **Sampling design:** Non-probability sampling (Purposive sampling) will be followed to draw the sample from the target population. The merit of Purposive Sampling includes ease of testing, information rich and completeness of data collected. According to C.R. Kothari (2004), the elements of cosmos is chosen purposively to form a sample as it is indicative of the entire population.
- **Tools:** Structured questionnaire will be designed to gather data on employers' perspective on Soft Skills with respect to employability is being planned.
- **Techniques**: A Likert scale questionnaire might be used to gather response from the respondents with limited number of open ended questions for qualitative insights.
- **Statistical consideration/ software applications** – Correlation Analysis, Multiple Linear Regression Analysis, etc. will be applied post data collection. Further, statistical tools will be

identified during the course of the study that would be relevant with the alignment of the study.

ii) Secondary Data collection

To better comprehend the various structures and draw some similarities with the planned study, a comprehensive literature study of journals, Books, Case studies, different websites, etc. will be conducted.

iii) Procedure of the data collection

Steps:

1. Approval or permissions would be taken from the various stakeholders i.e. the management colleges and the recruiters.
2. Pilot Testing would be done with a suitable number of respondents to check validity and reliability of the questionnaire.
3. Distribution of the questionnaire would be done through Social media platforms (Google form**)**.

iv) Ethical Considerations: consent/access/and participants' protection

The purpose and methodology to gather the information would be stated to the Management Colleges. Prior permission or consent will be taken from the authorities of the colleges. No inducements will be given to participate in the study.

The stakeholders at the corporates will be well-versed about the objective and methodology to gather the information. Prior permission or consent will be taken from the authorities of the corporates. No inducements will be given to participate in the study.

The participants will also be ensured of the privacy of their responses. Hence, concerns like informed consent, anonymity and participants' protection will be addressed to all respondents participating in the study.

5. DATA ANALYSIS / DISCUSSION

5.1 Procedure

After data collection from students and organizations, quantitative and qualitative techniques will be applied for analysis. Quantitative data can be used for large sample, it is objective, faster, easier and more cost effective. The qualitative data can provide the depth and the detail.

5.2 Quantitative Analysis- The techniques of quantitative analysis would include:

Statistical Tests:

- **Correlation Analysis:** To examine relationships between students' and employers' perspectives.
- **Multiple Linear Regression Analysis:** To evaluate the impact of students' and employers' perspectives on employability.

5.3 Qualitative Analysis: The techniques of qualitative analysis would include:
Content Analysis, etc. will be used for to analyze to identify and describe the student and the employers' perspectives.

This combination of quantitative and qualitative methods will offer a wide-ranging understanding of alignment between management students' and employers' perspectives, addressing both measurable outcomes and in-depth analysis. The criteria and statistical tests will be carefully chosen to align with the study's objectives and will provide actionable insights into the relationship between competencies, stakeholder perspectives, and employability.

6. LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

Limitations

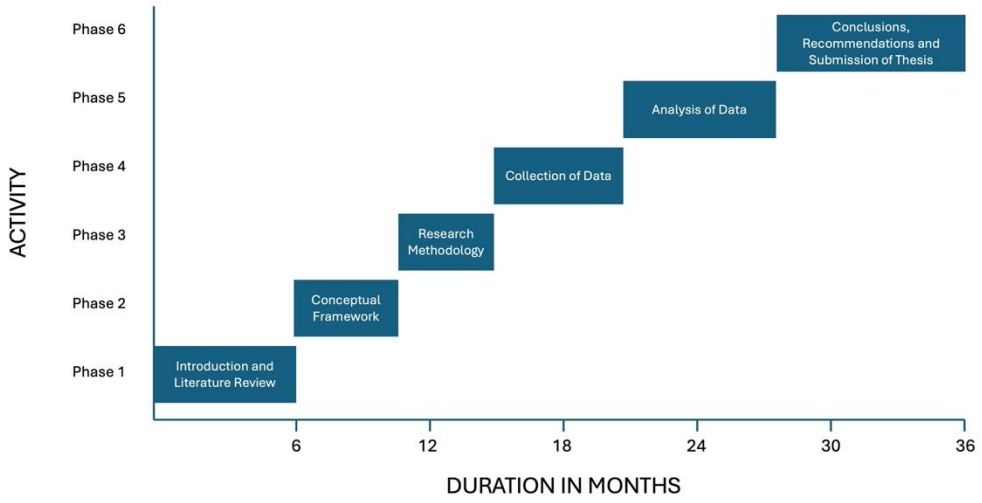
1. **Geographical Scope**: The study is limited to management colleges in Rajasthan, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other states or regions.
2. **Subjectivity in Perspectives**: Due to subjective opinions, there may be some biasness or inaccuracies.
3. **Focus on Soft Skills**: The exclusive focus on Soft Skills may overlook the role of technical skills or other factors (e.g., industry-specific requirements) in employability.

4. **Technological and Pandemic Impact**: Recent shifts in remote learning or hybrid work environments may influence responses, but these nuances might not be fully captured in the study.

Delimitations

1. **Population**: The study focuses only on post-graduate full-time management students and excludes students from distance learning, executive programs, or online courses.
2. **Recruiters**: Only recruiters involved in campus placements are included; organizations that do not hire through campus drives are excluded.
3. **Skill Scope**: The study is delimited to Soft skills without examining technical competencies or hard skills.
4. **Sectoral Focus**: The study is specific to the management domain and does not include perspectives from other professional education sectors (e.g., engineering or law).

7. WORK PLAN OF THE RESEARCH



Phase I: Introduction and Literature Review (First six months) – The researcher will work on Introduction and thorough review on:

- Employability grounded on graduates' higher education
- Importance of Soft Skills for management students
- Students' perspective
- Employers' perspective
- Skill gap

Post Literature review, the research gap, objectives and hypotheses would further be refined. Referencing of the sources will be compiled.

Phase II: Conceptual Framework (From 7th till 10th month)

- The researcher will work and develop the research framework by further confirming the relationships between independent and dependent variables.

Phase III: Research Methodology (From 11th till 15th month)

- Design the research methodology by using quantitative and qualitative approach. The researcher will develop questionnaires based on the variables and conduct pilot study. Further, the questionnaire would be improved.
- Further clarity of the target population (Management College students and Employers) and sample size.

Phase IV: Collection of Data (From 16th till 21st month)

- Direct the questionnaire to the target population using digital platform.
- Collect and organize the responses.

Phase V: Analysis of Data (From 22nd till 28th month)

- Perform data cleaning.
- Conduct statistical tests.

Phase VI: Conclusions, Recommendations and Submission of Thesis (From 29th till 36th month)

- Discuss the implications of the findings and interpret the results.

- Based on the insights from the study, suggest recommendation to the management colleges.

- Compile, review and submit the thesis.

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